DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 169 583 CS 204 772

AUTHOR Washburn, Judith M.
TITLE The Evaluation Process.
PUB DATE Aug 78
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (68th, Kansas City, Missouri, November 23-25, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; *Cultural Awareness; Elementary Education; Ethnic Stereotypes; *Ethnic Studies; *Evaluation Criteria; *Multicultural Education; *Reading Material Selection

ABSTRACT

Before teachers can heed recent calls for planning literary experiences that expose children to books about people in other cultures, they need to evaluate the books on the many ethnic booklists. This evaluation process can be confusing, due to the varying quality of multiethnic literature for children. There are five questions that teachers should consider in evaluating multiethnic books: (1) Are there stereotypes in words or pictures? Stereotyping frequently occurs in language, in the patterns of daily life presented, and in the pictures. (2) What does the story imply? The plot, theme, or tone may contain hidden meanings that convey a distorted view of an ethnic group; further, stories may deal only with the past history of a culture or may omit major aspects of a culture in their portrayals. (3) What are the author's qualifications? The author must have knowledge of the customs, habits, and attitudes of a group to present them accurately. (4) When was the book published? Many older books reflect outdated attitudes, contain offensive vocabulary, and portray stereotyped situations. (5) What is the literary merit of the book? The literary elements of a work must be carefully drawn, insightfully developed, and adequately concluded. In conclusion, teachers must evaluate the available literature and offer those books that present the best, most honest picture of our multiethnic society. (GT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED169543

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"The Evaluation Process"

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Judith M. Washburn

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Session E.2 Evaluating Multi-Ethnic Literature for Children

Judith M. Washburn

August, 1978

CS204772

For many years, American public school teachers were expected to stress the similarities in our culture. America was a "melting pot" where foreigners became Americans, and the schools were one place where this change, or melting, took place. Later, as this idea was losing popularity, the call rang out for ethnic studies and more attention to the many diverse cultures that make-up our pluralistic society. Again, the public schools were looked to as one place where an idea could become a reality. Pan-African studies, Chicano studies, and the like dotted the curriculums of schools across the country. And with every good curriculum came a booklist. However, after using some of these curriculums and booklists, teachers became increasingly wary. They noted that for children to learn to accept and respect the diverse cultures in our society they needed more than a recognition of differences in diet, family custom, or language pattern. The children needed to learn to appreciate the richness of cultural difference and develop some feelings of empathy for

all people. In a speech at the 1972 NCTE Convention, Esther Jenkins listed ten "Goals of a Multi-Ethnic Literature Program." She showed how carefully planned literary experiences which expose children to books about people in other cultures help each child realize the richness of American society. Among the many good points Jenkins mentioned were the following:

> The child could realize that not all people share his personal beliefs, that in other cultures people may have different value systems, and that despite differences, individuals can and must live together in harmony. And that people belonging to ethnic groups other than his are real people with feelings and emotions similar to his, with needs very much like his own. (Jenkins; 695)

I'd like to suggest that anyone truly interested in a multi-ethnic literature program for children, carefully consider Jenkins' goals.

Many teachers, aware of the need for depth in multi-ethnic programs, worked to modify curriculum and booklists. However, they were often confused over the quality and quantity of mate-

rial on the lists. What was needed, of course, were books that provide a knowledge and sensitivity that spanned barriers of race, color, and religion which keep people apart. To give children the best opportunity to know other people, teachers needed to evaluate the books on the many ethnic booklists.

This evaluation process can be confusing. Many books dealing with or claiming to deal with the culturally different child have been printed recently. Some of these books only remotely deal with the culturally different child and his environment; others offer a biased picture of different societies; still others are excellent. Upon a closer examination of booklists, teachers often find books printed years ago that contain outdated attitudes and dress. Also, there is a varying number of books available about children of different cultures. For example, there are few books about Chinese Americans that do not take place in China or Chinatown. Teachers need to become more

aware of the varying quality and quantity of multi-ethnic literature for children.

Several groups have published position papers that include criteria for evaluating books. The Council on Interracial Books for Children has developed guidelines for analyzing books for racism and sexism. Marsha Rudman, in an excellent book, Children's Literature, An Issues Approach, has adapted and elaborated on these. Her book has a wealth of information for teachers and librarians. (Especially useful is the annotated bibliography of children's books that follows each chapter.) When a group of teachers and I worked through these and other guidelines for evaluating books, we came up with a modified list that has helped us to become more aware of possible flaws in children's books as well as helped us to identify positive features in the books. Some people may view our choice of items as a cursory review, but we felt they were realistic points for the classroom teacher to

consider.

CRITERIA FOR BOOK SELECTION
or
Five Questions to Consider

1. Are there stereotypes in words and/or pictures?

"A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about a particular group, race, or sex, which generally carries derogatory implications. Some 'famous' stereotypes of Blacks are the happy-go-lucky Sambo eating watermelon, or a fat, old, eye-rolling mammy." (Rudman; 178)

Often in children's literature, culture groups are presented in an unvarying manner; the descriptions are over-generalized and often derogatory. There is little if any originality or individualization in plot or character. Stereotyping can take place in words of the story, in the patterns of daily life presented, and in the pictures.

While reviewing the available literature about Native Americans, for example, we found such demeaning words as "redskin,"

"buck," "how," and "ugh." Cliches such as "heap big" and "many a moon" are present in several stories. Native Americans object to the fictional "Cowboy and Indian" version of their language.

Other minorities also resent certain loaded words. Teachers must be sensitive to the words in the story. Words should not be used to present a demeaning picture of a minority.

Stereotyped family and daily life patterns are also common in books about minorities. Typically a book about a black family takes place in a poor ghetto. Often the family is fatherless; an explanation concerning the father's absence is seldom given. Native Americans are often shown living a poor, hopeless life on a reservation or rejecting their heritage and becoming more like the white man. Chinese Americans are shown in traditional dress, living in a Chinatown, or working in a laundry. Teachers have to be ready to counteract this stereotyping by presenting books that offer a more varied realistic

look at family life and lifestyles.

Stereotyping in pictures is often obvious to the sensitive reviewer. Fewer books are being printed that show black characters with Caucasian features. However, other careless representations of minority Americans and their customs can be found in books. For example, illustrators still mix the clothes and customs of various Native American tribes in the pictures of an "Indian" book. Mexican Americans resent the typical picture of their people always wearing sombreros or leading burros to an open air market. Teachers need to look for individuality and accuracy in the illustrations. Minority members' individuality in word, dress, custom, and life style must be presented to give children an honest picture of ethnic culture in America.

The second question we posed was: What does the story imply?

The plot, theme or tone of the story may contain hidden meanings. Reviewers must consider what the author is implying as

well as what is being openly discussed. Some authors use a condescending tone or present a distorted view of a minority culture. Other authors use literature as a means of preaching a specific doctrine. Teachers need to become aware of the effect the story and its meaning will have upon the children's knowledge of a culture. Educators must also be sensitive to the effect of the story's meaning upon minority children's self-esteem.

For example, sometime the "happy ending" of an ethnic story involves the central character accepting the values and customs of the majority society. The inference is that the majority way is best. This type of ending says that people can be proud of their heritage only if they also adjust and accept the values of the majority culture. Many people, proud of their heritage, would contest this point.

Further, many stories have settings "long ago and far away."

It is doubtful that these books will be useful in helping teachers present a representative look at ethnic groups in America today. Children of a minority group will have difficulty finding similarities in their experiences and those of the characters in the book that is set in the past. Also, if books are available primarily to present a country's past, the implication is that the present day culture is not valued enough to be written about.

A few authors of contemporary children's literature preach. Tracts published in Communist China are presented as literature for children but are in fact propaganda. Teachers should be aware of the "message" in these books.

The actual and implied storyline can affect a culturally different child's self-esteem. It can also present a distorted view of an ethnic group. Teachers must consider what the story implies as well as what it says in print when evaluating the book for classroom use.

Another part of this question is a problem of omission. No matter how we search, there simply are not many books available on certain topics or cultures. For example, Gloria Blatt reviewed twenty-nine books about "The Mexican American in Children's Literature." She found that there were very few books that presented Mexican-American children in the United States. She found many books that showed problem situations in Mexico. Isabel Schon looked at books about Latin Americans. (Looking at Books about Latin Americans) She noted "the treatment of Latin Americans by Americans or foreign authors is in general an acceptance of one truth: poverty, and this is fully described." (Schon; 267) She read thirty-four children's books about Latin Americans focusing chiefly on Mexico and Mexican-Americans. Nineteen dealt with poverty, four described Mexican traditions and holidays, and only one described the life of a middle class family in Mexico City. [Nine Days to Christmas, Marie Hall Ets and

Aurora Labastida] We need more books about Mexican-Americans and other groups living today in the United States.

A third question that needs to be considered is that of the author's background.

What are the author's qualifications?

The Council on Interracial Books for Children suggests reading the biographical material on the jacket flap or in the back of the book to find out more about the author. We need to know what qualifies the author to deal with a minority theme or topic.

Some people argue that an author should be a member of the minority group about which he writes. For example, people holding this belief would prefer John Steptoe's books about the black experience over those of Ezra Jack Keats. I find this to be an extreme position. However, the author must have knowledge of the customs, habits, and attitudes of a group to present them

accurately. By looking at biographical material about the author, we can discover if there was anything in the author's background that would specifically recommend them for a book. Ideally, an author's work is an honest and original story that presents the culture fairly.

A fourth point to consider is the date of publication or When was the book published?

Many older books reflect outdated attitudes, contain offensive vocabulary, and portray stereotyped situations. In the 1960's books on minority themes were rushed to publication. Unfortunately, in the haste to meet the growing demand for multiethnic books, authors and publishers sold books of questionable quality. Many offered a picture of a minority culture from a white person's perspective. Others offered descriptions of dress and customs, but never examined the underlying relationships of life in a pluralistic society. Only very recently, in

the late 1960's and early 1970's have children's books begun to reflect the realities of a multiracial society.

Teachers should look at the copywrite date to get a clue as to how likely the book will offer a realistic picture of another culture.

Finally, a good children's book on any topic must be able to be judged on the question:

What is the literary merit of the book?

When evaluating literature, it is true that we must carefully consider the cultural authenticity of a book and the children's response to it. Today, we have spent a great deal of our time discussing authenticity. We have also inferred that the children's response to a book will help to develop attitudes and opinions. This idea has been researched. Linda and Gary Berg-Cross reported in a recent Reading Teacher article that attitudes of four to six year olds could be changed by hearing

popular and socially relevant stories. They wrote that this may show that literature is an efficient means of communicating and altering attitudes faster than other means. Knowing this, leads us to carefully consider the story line and message of a book when considering it for use in the classroom.

However, a very pressing point, in my opinion, is the value of the book as a piece of literature. I guess I am still caught up in the persuasive arguments of Robert Penn Warren who taught that the structure of the work must communicate meaning with power, originality and precision. Warren and the "New Critics" concentrated on the form of the work - the plot, characterization, setting, theme, point of view, style, and tone. Often called the "literary elements" of a work, these seven interrelated parts must be carefully drawn, insightfully developed, and adequately concluded in any work for children and adults. There is no excuse for <u>not</u> considering the literary merits of a

book. Too many books on a multi-ethnic literature have characters that are superficially drawn and plots that are too conveniently concluded. We need more books of high literary merit.

In conclusion, there are many books on the topic of multi-ethnic literature. Some are very good, others have recognizable faults. Generally, books that have a universal appeal such as Keat's Snowy Day, Marie H. Ets' Gilberto and the Wind, or Bette Greene's Phillip Hall Likes Me. I Reckon Maybe are desired most in the classroom. When planning a multi-ethnic curriculum for children, teachers must evaluate the available literature and offer those books that present the best, most honest picture of our multi-ethnic society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berg-Cross, Linda and Gary Berg-Cross. "Listening to Stories May Change Children's Social Attitudes," The Reading Teacher, 31:659-63, March, 1978.

Blatt, Gloria. "The Mexican American in Children's Literature," Elementary English, 45, April, 1968.

Ets, Marie. Gilberto and the Wind. Illustrated by Marie Ets. New York: Viking Press, 1963.

Greene, Bette. Phillip Hall Likes Me. I Reckon Maybe. Illustrated by Charles Lilly. New York: Dial Press, 1974.

Interracial Books for Children Bulletin. New York: Council on Interracial Books for Children, Inc.

Jenkins, Esther. "Multi-Ethnic Literature: Promise and Problems," Elementary English, 28:693-699, May, 1973.

Keats, Erza Jack. The Snowy Day. New York: Viking, 1962.

Reid, Virginia M., ed. Reading Ladders for Human Relations, Fifth Edition. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1972.

Rudman, Marsha Kabakow. Children's Literature, An Issues Approach. Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1976.

Schon, Isabel. "Looking at Books about Latin Americans," Language Arts, 53:267-271, March, 1976.

JW/pr/8-78